

Dance, Narratives, Heritage

Dance and Narratives

Dance as Intangible and Tangible Cultural Heritage

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DANCE AND NARRATIVES OF WOMANHOOD

In the paper the term narrative is used, both as story telling and as account of real events and life stories of women. In the oral presentation I used story-telling techniques such as change of pace and voice, as well as repetitions. In this written paper I indicate these sections through the use of italicised text in an attempt to keep some of the flavour of the original version. I also want to comment that whilst the essay is informed by theory, it is primarily ideological in nature, and can therefore be seen as a position paper.

Keywords: Tiwi; narrative; gender; feminism; violence

Introduction

According to anthropologists Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing: "Narrative provides a way of temporarily experiencing the world by the way it records and recounts, defines frame, orders, structure shapes, schematises and connects events" [Rapport; Overing 2007 (2000):318]. Similarly philosopher Anthony Kerby argues "[N]arratives are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately of ourselves" [Kerby 1991:3].

My presentation brings together two strands of my work: gender relationship as expressed through dance among the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Island and in the choreographic work of Mallika Sarabhai, a dancer-choreographer activist from Ahmedabad, India whose work often focuses on women.

Having taught in dance and anthropology programmes for over thirty years I have found that the classes on gender are always very popular and students always have a lot to say. One of the first comments that is made is that dance in the West – at least in its theatre incarnation – has tended to be seen as a female activity. The majority of female students recall how they started dance classes at a young age whilst their brothers were sent to football, or other activities considered more masculine.

A Tiwi narrative

Among the Tiwi, dance owed its existence to the death of a child:

Long ago when all the animals lived on earth as human beings, the people were happy, and they never died. They never died until that day when Purukupali found his son Tjinani dead. Purukupali had gone hunting. Bima, his wife, left their baby son in the camp alone, and went food gathering. When she was in the bush, Tapara, her husband's younger brother, joined her and seduced her. Every time she talked about going back to camp to look after her son, Tapara grabbed her and she stayed. During that time the sun moved higher and higher in the sky and Tjinani was no longer in the shade, where she had left him. Tjinani became sick and, with the heat of the sun, he died. When Purukupali came back, he found his son dead. By the time Bima and Tapara returned, he was in a rage. In his wrath he beat his wife with a stick. He hit and hit and she was transformed into a curlew. One can still hear her cry every night in the bush. Tapara asked Purukupali to give him the dead child. "In three days I will return with him alive" he said, but Purukupali refused. He would not listen. He fought with his brother all across the island. It was a bloody battle and their tracks can still be seen in

Ipali. They fought with fighting sticks. They fought, and fought, and fought, until Purukupali hit Tapara in the eye and killed him. Tapara went up in the sky to become the moon. He dies each month and returns after three days. Purukupali grabbed his son and called out: "Go, all of you. You must make grave posts, paint your bodies, and dance". Then he walked backward into the sea saying: "We will follow my son. No one will ever come back. Every one will die." The water rose and the sea took them.

During my different fieldworks, Tiwi people never sat down and told a myth as a full story as I have just given. I never collected a full text of the myth about death, as this is not the way the stories from the Dreaming are told. Rather I was told bits and pieces at different times, *nouveau roman* style. Different people emphasized different aspects. For example, in the story just told, the men tended to elaborate on the fight between Purukupali and Tapara. They also tended to put most of the blame on Bima. For them it was Bima's betrayal, which brought Purukupali's harsh law of death for all. Tapara, in contrast, was nice as he offered regeneration.

Women, on the other hand, insisted on the reluctance of Bima to go with Tapara. They accepted that Bima and Tapara had sex – after all in traditional Tiwi society where husbands were usually much older than their wives, women often had young lovers and when they became widow, they usually married one of their husbands' younger brothers; but my interlocutors insisted that Bima was worried about her son. She wanted to go back to him quickly, but was forced down by Tapara.

It is interesting that the fabric, printmaking, and clothing business started by Tiwi women in 1969 is called Bima Wear and that the Association counts as one of its objectives: "to provide a safe facility for Tiwi women and girls to access support." Choosing her name for their association is to honour Bima, not to critique her.

A wave of feminism

My first fieldwork on Melville Island started in 1980 (see Grau 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005 for examples of my Tiwi publications). I had come of age during the previous decade, a period when the so-called second wave feminism took place. Many of the key texts of feminism were written then: for example, Betty Friedan's *The female mystique* [1963], Kate Millett's *Sexual politics* [1970], Germaine Greer's *The female eunuch* [1970], Gisèle Halimi's *La cause des femmes* [1973], Erica Jong *Fear of flying* [1973], Andrea Dworkin *Woman hating: a radical look at sexuality* [1974] and *Our blood* [1976], Benoîte Groult *Ainsi soit-elle* [1975], Marilyn French's *The woman's room* [1977]. Needless to say that all were seen to be controversial, some had had difficulties in getting published and many had found it hard to be reviewed, if at all. Whilst I had not yet read all these texts then, like Andrea Dworkin, I did not see myself particularly as a woman, I saw myself first and foremost as a person. I also felt that the mechanics of sex did not have to be necessarily about a penetrative act, but that it could also be an act of envelopment. Unlike Dworkin, therefore, I did not see all male-female sexual encounters as rape.

During the same period female anthropologists too started to express dissatisfaction with the androcentric bias of their discipline. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, for example, argued that, "even in situations of overt sex role asymmetry women have a good deal more power than conventional theorists have assumed" [Rosaldo; Lamphere 1974:9]. Indeed what clearly came to light was that male scholars – and female ones who had internalised the dominant discourse – often simply assumed that women could only be second fiddles in society and they had often imposed their sexist bias on the people they worked with.

Like their Women Studies' counterparts, the female anthropologists' work (see for example Strathern 1972, Ardener 1975, Weiner 1976), whilst well received within some circles and reviewed favourably by their peers, did not necessarily receive the same support as works by, and about, men. Indeed, Jane Goodale told me how, despite fantastic reviews for her book *Tiwi wives* [1971], her publishers did not feel there would be a market to get it published in paperback. *She rallied colleagues. She called her friends and they responded. They responded and the publishers changed their mind.* The book came out in paperback in 1974 and has had many reprints since, vindicating her.

Sex and gender as symbolic constructs

It is very much during this period, that scholars started to develop the notion of gender and sex as symbolic constructs, rather than biological facts. In my own work among the Tiwi it became clear, for instance, that to think of male and female bodies as physically distinct and sexed was not clear-cut. Being a mother or a father, for example, was seen as independent of one's sex: women were mothers to their children and their sister's children and fathers to their brothers' children, whilst men were fathers to their own and their brothers' children and mothers to their sisters' children. This was made explicit in dance when men danced that they were pregnant, giving birth and breastfeeding and women danced that they found the spirit of unborn children, an activity that only fathers can do. Being a mother or a father therefore was about a quality of relationship between two individuals and had little to do with their genitalia.

Whilst I had found different ways of engaging with and constructing femininity and masculinity, I had certainly not found a paradise of equality. Tiwi men could also be sexist as we saw earlier with the story of Bima and Purukupali. Yet the expression *le deuxième sexe*, coined in the 1940s by Simone de Beauvoir to describe the second rate status of women around the world applied differently to Tiwi than to de Beauvoir's own society. In her analysis, two factors explained the evolution of women's condition: economic power and the right to control their reproductive ability [de Beauvoir 1949]. Tiwi women certainly had the first. Anthropologists have shown that in hunting and gathering societies, women at times produce up to 90% of the diet. This is substantial economic power indeed. And whilst I did not inquire specifically about pregnancies, women with their large support of sisters as co-mothers did not seem to experience the isolation that many women lived through in my own society once they became mothers.

What about academia, where on the whole equality has been gained? It is fascinating to note that in the collection *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, published in 1986, only **one** text was by a woman, the literary critic Louise Pratt! Were female anthropologists not worthy to be given a space in the world of this 'new ethnographic writing'? I liked *Writing culture* then and I still like it now. *Yet... Yet, how could a text focusing on issues of representation of the so-called "other," a text which shook the discipline, a text that is so often invoked as a landmark for the new emerging post-modern and post-colonial anthropology, how can such a text ignore women, the ultimate "other"?* I was therefore delighted when the collection *Women writing culture* edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon came out in 1995. It is different but as exciting as Clifford and Marcus' text, but it certainly has not had the impact their book had. Doing a quick search on JSTOR for instance, showed less than half the results for *Women writing culture* than for *Writing culture*.

How can women be heard? If our peers, both male and female, do not support us, what chance is there for our voices to be heard?

In the 1970s women wanted equal rights, which for instances they officially gained in the United Kingdom in 1975 when the Sex Discrimination Act was passed, but they also wanted to fight gynocide. According to Dworkin:

Gynocide is the systematic crippling, raping, and/or killing of women by men. Gynocide is the word that designates the relentless violence perpetrated by the gender class men against the gender class women [Dworkin 1976:16].

Whilst in some countries women have gained rights, these are never entirely safe. Last year the report *Sex and power 2013: Who runs Britain?* was published by the Centre for Women and Democracy. One can read in its executive summary:

Women are a majority (51 per cent) of the population, but power is concentrated in the hands of a minority. What applies to politics applies to other areas as well. We looked at most of the fields which could be described as coming within the definition 'public life' – in other words, areas which either raise or spend public money (e.g. health), which make fundamental decisions about individual lives (e.g. the courts) or which influence or affect our national culture (e.g. the media). In almost all of them the over-representation of men is evident; in some the absence of women is marked. Even in trades and professions in which women predominate as employees they are often hard to find at the top [Centre for Women and Democracy 2013:5]

The report also notes that "at the current rate of progress, a child born today will be drawing her pension before she has any chance of being equally represented in the UK Parliament" [Centre for Women and Democracy 2013:5]. Women are more discriminated in the twenty-first century than they were in the preceding one. Indeed in 2006, the United Nations carried out an in-depth study on violence against women. The report makes dire reading. A number of global surveys for instance have reported that half of all women, who die from homicide, are killed by their current or former husbands or partners. According to the World Health Organization in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, and the United States, between 40% and 70% of female murder victims are killed by their partners. In Colombia, one woman is reportedly killed by her partner or former partner every six days.

This is a lot of women! Why so much hate? Why so much hate against women?

One billion rising is a response by artists and activists to help eradicate violence against women (see online: www.onebillionrising.org). The "billion" refers to the UN statistic that one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime and one in three will be beaten up [United Nations Secretary-General 2008: online].

Dance has a strong position within the movement. In February 2014, posters exhorted us 'to dance to end the violence' or, quoting the writer/poet Alice Walker, proposed that 'hard times require furious dancing' [Walker 2010]. It is something that Mallika Sarabhai, the dancer choreographer activist mentioned earlier has taken very much to heart. Throughout her career, she has created many works to raise awareness of the plight of women (see Grau 2007, 2010, 2013 for more detailed discussions of Sarabhai's work). Here I would like to present one of her recent projects *Women with broken wings*, which she developed with Swiss pianist

Elizabeth Sombart. This project is described on its website as 'a humanist project of international scale, initiated by Elizabeth Sombart. It aims to help raise global consciousness about the crimes committed onto women by other human beings' (see Sombart 2014:online). Accompanied by Sombart's piano music, ranging from Chopin to Satie, Sarabhai develops twelve tableaux showing the lives of girls growing into women. Using *abhinaya*, the technique used in classical Indian dance to convey emotions, as well as her own contemporary technique, she shows the delights and joy of life (a young child discovering her feet and hands, a woman gazing into the eyes of her newborn) and how these too brief moments of happiness are destroyed by violence and the harshness of everyday reality (a female child ripped from her mother with a view of infanticide, a wife being hit by her husband), she shows the daily humiliations suffered by too many women around the world.

Looking at this violence (admittedly not just against women – men and nature are also violated on a daily basis – but women bear the brunt of it) it is easy to despair, especially when working towards a better world is seen as utopian, romantic, against progress, and unpractical. Nevertheless one can argue that 'a commitment towards optimism [is] a moral imperative' since one **cannot** know that a better world is **not** possible, 'continuing to justify, and reproduce the mess we have today' [Graeber 2004:10] would indeed be a betrayal.

One of the beautiful aspects of *Women with broken wings* is the celestial memorial, where on the website one can put a star for a woman, anywhere in the world, who has had her wings broken.

Let's all of us put stars to commemorate and celebrate all these women. Let's constitute a virtual memory for all assassinated women. Let's give moral support for those mourning, and reminding us what we can achieve.

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